Beyond Labelling: Rethinking the role and value of the word 'refugee'

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The conceptual starting point

As I sat down in my doctoral viva across the table from Roger Zetter to present a thesis entitled 'Beyond the Politics of Labelling', the thought resurfaced that my choice of examiner may well have been ill-conceived. Zetter's work on this topic, published largely in this journal, inspired a generation of researchers to explore the role and value of the refugee label, becoming the automatic citation for any allusion to the ambiguity or malleability of the term. Indeed for Zetter (1988: 2; 1985), the founding *raison d'être* of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* was 'to explore the rich research agenda established by the label 'refugee'' and to 'examine and shape the form and extent of the margins at which the label applies' (1988: 5).

At the core of his work, and much of that which it informed and inspired, was a now well-established set of propositions. First, how the label 'refugee' is understood is highly changeable (Bakewell, 2002; Hilhorst et al, 2012; Kumsa, 2006; McConnell, 2013) and largely audience- and context-dependent (Chimni, 1993). It is simultaneously embodied by individuals, used to refer to a legal-normative status and responsibilities, and signifies a host of broader social, political and societal issues. With the modern refugee regime taking shape around her, Arendt (1951), for example, argued that 'identities associated with state and citizenship are constantly being redefined and reclassified thus the concept of refugee will also move, ambiguously, between definitions depending on the notions of 'self' and 'other' which prevail at the time.'

Beyond these shifts, associated with the continual redefinition of our political communities, the word itself is known to acquire meaning from multiple further sources. This is accentuated by its position at the interstices of different 'social worlds', accumulating significance and meaning through various sources: the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (herein the 1951 Convention), governments reports and statements, media outputs and individual's experiences, amongst others. Each 'user', however, is known to exercise only 'partial jurisdiction' over the meaning of the refugee label (Fujimura, 1992). Their interests, approaches and understandings of the label may fully complement those of others around them, or prove mutually exclusive. To accommodate this, the label is described in effect as a 'boundary object', 'both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing [it], yet robust enough to maintain common identity across sites' (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 393).

Second, how, when and why the meanings of the label change is known to be of immense personal, political and practical importance. While new understandings of these individuals may open up new ways of defining and approaching the 'refugee problem' (Haddad, 2008), the range of ideas and actions

invoked by the word 'refugee' can become so expansive and disparate as to undermine any initial agreement over its meaning. Responses to these individuals may then be plagued by a lack of coordination and focus (Shacknove, 1985).

Reinforcing the importance of recognising the changeable nature of the label is the fact that these different meanings have both productive and prescriptive capacities. As Zetter (1991) emphasises, labels do not just 'describe' or 'identify' pre-existing objects or forms; they condition the identity and behaviour of that upon which they are bestowed, including those individuals who may wish to acquire them. In order to 'sustain an international identity of an unresolved international issue' (*ibid.*: 56), for example, refugees may be expected to perform certain 'images'. In the case of the refugees that Zetter conducted his initial fieldwork with in Cyprus, these expectations were seen to have detrimental effects. They encouraged behaviour that heightened individuals' sense of ostracisation and undermined their access to durable solutions in the long-term.

Similar observations, of refugees projecting a particular identity to encourage a certain response, have been noted elsewhere (Malkki, 1992; 1996; Inhetveen, 2006). As has aid workers' requirements that refugees do so, in order to secure their access to resources. As Malkki and others have observed, the increasing synonymy of refugee status with victimhood and vulnerability has resulted in some humanitarian staff viewing those who do not fulfil these expected subjectivities with suspicion. Against the ideal figure of the suffering refugee, Malkki (1996: 385) notes that 'any actual refugees were always imperfect instantiations' to the relief workers that surrounded them. Pressures thus exist for refugees to fulfil more than just the legal definition of their label: in certain environments they must embody dominant or desirable tropes of 'refugeehood' too.

Third, this strand of work on the refugee label has been accompanied by a connected discussion around the proliferation of new bureaucratic labels within the refugee regime. In order to restrict individual's access to the 'privileged' status of refugeehood, various authors have discussed how alternative regimes and labels have been developed. For Zetter (2007), this subdivision of individuals according to criterion of eligibility and perceived protection 'needs' has resulted in the exclusion of those whose claims to protection are less readily accommodated - legally, politically and socially - within existing protection frameworks. The result is that 'a new set of labels…compound the perception that the protective label 'refugee' is no longer a basic Convention right, but a highly privileged prize which few deserve and most claim illegally' (*ibid.*: 184). In turn, however, the proliferation of these new words to describe and manage those on the move is argued to have impacted upon how the word 'refugee' is understood. As Barsky (2016: 39) states, 'the meaning of the word is determined more in regards to related clusters of terms than to a particular referent.'

A missing theory?

Many fascinating studies therefore exist that present critical academic and empirical observations on the performative and adaptable components of the refugee label. They explore how this single word takes on multiple different meanings, emotions and practices, and discuss what this can mean for how refugees are responded to. A number of important distinctions are nonetheless missed. First, some of the work fluctuates between discussing the proliferation of new connotations associated with the refugee label, and the appearance of new labels and categories for these individuals. They do so without acknowledging key political and conceptual differences between the two (for example, see Zetter, 2007). Relabelling populations with new words, for example, is one way to circumvent the rights and responsibilities that states agreed to uphold upon ratifying the 1951 Convention. The Tampa Affair of 2001 exemplifies this. The Australian Prime Minister began to call asylum-seekers 'illegals' as his government refused to allow a Norwegian ship carrying 438 rescued refugees to enter its territorial waters (Gelber and McDonald, 2006). Those on board boats were dismissed as 'queue jumpers', supposedly undermining the opportunities for real refugees, who were 'waiting patiently and orderly in refugee camps…for resettlement,' to access protection (McNevin, 2007: 622).

Establishing 'new' meanings for the refugee label constitutes a very different endeavour. In prescribing appropriate behaviour for states, UNHCR and refugees, the label enables each actor to hold the others to account. It legitimises UNHCR's involvement in the sovereign affairs of states and as an arbiter of appropriate behaviour vis-à-vis refugees, provides states with access to the sizeable political and financial resources of the refugee regime, and maintains an international framework through which a minimum threshold of rights and responsibilities are upheld.[1] As such, though there remain individuals who lack recognition despite fulfilling one of the definitions of refugeehood, and individuals who self-identify as refugees without any legal basis to their claims, the importance of this legal 'bedrock' remains important to stress. The conversation between states and UNHCR about the provision of durable solutions occurs precisely *because* populations are recognised as legally eligible for such support.

In addition, if states and UNHCR are using the refugee label with respect to a particular population, it raises the possibility of using certain ethical, as well as legal, arguments to stress these actors' responsibilities. This arises from a challenge to Zetter's (1991: 59) contention, which indeed seems to contradict himself on some level, that 'refugeehood…may not differ from the experience of non-refugee groups.' On the contrary, through formally labelling individuals as refugees, organisations and states often subject them to changes in how they are perceived and responded to. They may be confined to

[1] Primarily, this concerns non-refoulement though a maximalist interpretation of the 1951 Convention would also entail states providing refugees with the right to work, freedom of movement, property and freedom of non-political association.

camps with no rights to employment or mobility, and exposed to a whole realm of politicking around their status that they might otherwise have avoided. Stressing that these parties have legal responsibilities towards refugees ensures that they cannot initiate a potential transformation in these individuals' lives without also inheriting the duty to redress the processes that they have set in motion. This includes through working to establish enduring solutions for these individuals.[2]

Second, though these articles detail the multiple meanings that adhere to the refugee label, they rarely provide a coherent way of ordering all these competing or complementary connotations, despite the many calls for it (Zetter, 1988; 1991). In particular, those frameworks that do exist appear not to provide any clear structure for theorising the relationships *between* meanings. I argue that this arises in part from their failure to recognise the importance of the legal 'passage-point' detailed above. Phillips and Hardy, for example, who provide one of these heuristic tools, propose breaking the refugee label in to only two components: the concept and the object. The concept is proposed as the 'idealised conception of *what* a refugee is' (Phillips and Hardy, 1997: 160), consisting of the culturally and historically situated 'ideas, categories, relationships and theories through which we understand the world and relate to one another' (Hardy and Phillips, 1999: 3). Adhering to this concept are the rights and protections for which refugees qualify and the obligations that countries have to provide them. In contrast to the intangible and abstract concept, the object 'refugee' is said to consist of an individual's material form, which is 'made sensible, given meaning, by the concept 'refugee'' (Phillips and Hardy, 1997: 168). Though an analytical distinction is drawn between them, the two components are shown to exist in an iterative relationship:

> 'if the concept of a 'political' refugee is applied to a particular individual, his or her rights to asylum are placed centre-stage. The concept of an 'economic' refugee, on the other hand, highlights the importance of measures to limit access and to deter or detain the individual' (Hardy and Phillips, 1999: 4).

This analytical approach nonetheless sidesteps the critical role played by the shared legal definition of a refugee. If refugees are not first identified as fulfilling the relevant legal framework, the rights and responsibilities that emerge from the infinitely varied 'concept' may simply cease in institutionalised contexts. This results in their example of the 'economic' refugee breaking down: if individuals were purely identified according to their economic needs, they would not be initially granted refugee status. As Zetter (1988: 5) states, the 1951 Convention, 1967 Protocol and other refugee instruments 'at least establish a *de minimis* definition.' These documents may not prove capable of restricting further interpretations from emerging, but they do provide a critical point of shared reference.

[2] Theoretically, this perspective encourages the reframing of a frequent anxiety in forced migration studies that centres on whether there is something unique about refugees beyond their legal status that makes them a clear object of study. I argue instead for focusing on the ways in which labelling individuals as refugees makes them different, and exploring what follows from this for the persons, governments and institutions affected.

Third and finally, these studies take it for granted that words can contain and convey an array of different meanings without discussing what qualities make this possible. Linguistic theory in particular is scarcely drawn upon to inform the critical observations about the role that language plays within the refugee regime. Though Zetter (1991: 56) acknowledges that 'sustaining the label is important for both the government and its dependent clients in order to sustain an international identity of an unresolved international issue,' the ability of words to accommodate this central tension - of maintaining their form and certain meanings *while* other aspects of how they are understood undergo significant shifts - is insufficiently discussed. Seminal articles by Shacknove, Malkki and Chimni further appear to skip over explaining how the meanings of certain words and objects transform and burgeon over time. As a result, they discuss neither the mechanisms for how this is possible nor how these meanings are assimilated and accommodated within the refugee regime, where the expectation of using language in a seemingly consistent, specific and ordered way reigns strong.

I therefore argue that studies exploring the polyvalence of the refugee label must foreground two main points. First, the importance of an initial shared meaning to facilitate and secure cooperation between various actors but second, the potential of the label to then exhibit very different meanings both over time and at the same time depending on the outlooks of the multiple groups engaging with them. The question then is what theory or theories can help us make sense of this? In this article I propose semiotics as a possible framework, by detailing the questions that it requires us to ask about the refugee label and the structure that it provides to schematise, order and explain the answers that emerge. The hope is that this may help clarify the term's 'uses' on the ground.

Introducing Semiotics

One of the key focuses of semiotic approaches is to explore the patterns and structures of meaning that we associate with the signs that we engage with in everyday life. Here, signs refers to 'everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else' (Eco, 1976: 7). The major proponents of this theoretical approach thus subscribe to the view that 'signs', be they objects, words or more abstract entities, do not coincide with inherent and immutable meanings but rather acquire them through patterns of association. A red cross or red crescent, for example, becomes meaningful because we are taught to associated them with the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and their humanitarian activities. Our ability to understand and communicate through these signs rests on our knowledge of the systems of convention that make their interpretation possible in particular social and political contexts. If these conventional, shared interpretations of words and objects did not exist, communication would be prohibitively challenging.

Adopting a semiotic framework for work within Refugee Studies, however, entails more than just exploring what the word refugee 'means' to the various constituencies engaging with it. It also pushes us to analyse how contexts come to shape this, and how the systems of convention that surround the

label exhibit dynamism over time and across different spaces. The major increase in support for Syrian refugees in Europe after the tragic image of Aylan Kurdi circulated in September 2015, for example, illustrated a change – albeit temporarily - in the ideas, images and emotions that European citizens associated with this nationality of refugees. It also pushes us to consider how its diverse meanings ultimately relate to one another and with what effects (Sturrock, 1986: 22).

Responding to the theoretical ambiguity noted above, semiotic theories and frameworks thus encourage us to focus in on two particularly interesting features of the refugee label. The first is that it provides a framework through which to order and analyse the multi-tiered structure of the word 'refugee' alluded to above. The second is that it draws attention to the relationship between these different orders of meaning, and the possible utility that actors can gain from exploiting the proximity or distance between them.

A multi-tiered framework

With regards to the first point, semiotic models provide a way to take observations about the simultaneous levels of meaning contained within the word refugee and to organise them within a structure. Using Saussure's (1983) basic sign and Hjemslev's (1961) theory on the multiple orders of signification, Roland Barthes provides a way to tie together denotative meanings, referring to the descriptive and 'literal' reading of a sign, with its connotative meanings. These 'connotations' include the differentiated ways that any audience might represent and read a sign due to its cultural, historical, representational and historical significance. In terms of the literal reading of the refugee label, I argue that it is composed of two parts: an individual who is displaced from their country of nationality, and who is unable or unwilling to avail them self of the protection of the state they left. For refugees awaiting institutionalised durable solutions, which forms the focus of my research, it is indeed the fulfilment of these two characteristics that results in these individuals acquiring refugee status, and that catalyses discussions over their future. In this highly institutionalised setting, the connotative readings are then suggested to constitute all other meanings conveyed by, and associated with, the label.

Following Saussure, Barthes proposed that the first-order of signification consisted of the sign, composed of the signifier, or form, and the signified, or meaning. In the case of the sign 'refugee', I argue that the signifier consists of the displaced individual while the signified constitutes the definition of a refugee as laid out in various Conventions and Declarations. From this point, when both components are in existence and refugee status has been deemed applicable, a series of new connotations can, and almost always do, become associated with the label as another layer, or order, of meaning.

At this second order, the sign from the first order is transformed from meaning to form, itself becoming a signifier. As Figure 1 suggests, it then combines with a new signified to produce the second-order

sign. Barthes christened this new signified the 'concept', describing it as a 'whole new history which is implanted' in to the schema (Barthes, 1972: 117). To Barthes, this concept is both functional and dynamic. New concepts can appear, disappear, expand and contract, giving rise to any number of shifts in understanding as well as the emergence of many co-existing connotations.

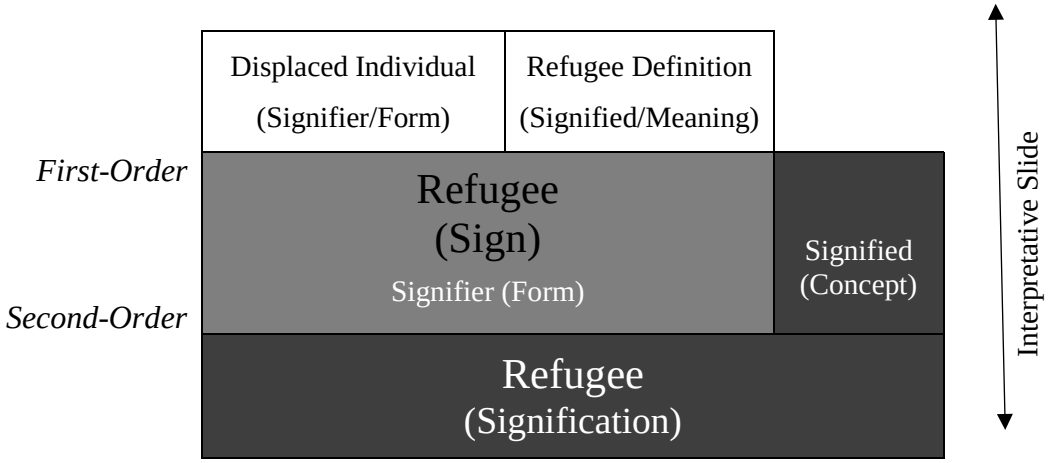

Figure 1. The multiple orders of the sign. Adapted from Barthes (1972).

The emergence of these concepts is not, however, argued to result in the loss or abandonment of the original signifier or signified. Barthes was very clear that the aim of this tiered structure was to instead illustrate how a new concept 'only impoverishes' the first-order sign through placing the initial meaning and form 'at a distance' (Barthes, 1972: 117). The sign is then to be understood as both 'full on one side and empty on the other' (*ibid.*: 116) as the object's foundational story may be partially concealed, depriving the first-order sign of its full meaning. Moving between the orders thus '*hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear.' This move constitutes neither an absolute break in content nor in form, but rather a means through which the initial signified and signifier are alternatively obscured and/or supplemented.

Signs are therefore characterised by Barthes by the fact that they enable an 'interpretative slide'. Over time and in entering different spaces, individuals may seamlessly 'slide' between the different orders of meaning due to personal circumstance, political intent and socio-historical conditions. They may also, however, draw meaning from all the different levels at once. Refugees, for example, may well be understood as displaced individuals entitled to auxiliary protection alongside being seen as tarnishing a country's reputation and a threat to national security. Ultimately, Barthes states that 'it is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form' which defines the signification, and its value and role (*ibid.*). To quote him at length, he states:

> 'The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form

> must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there.' (Barthes, 1972: 117)

Language is nonetheless never fully subservient to the needs and wishes of the individuals using it. Words, such as the refugee label, can be pre-invested with certain meanings such that refugees, states, UNHCR and other concerned actors have neither the ability nor the power to unilaterally define them as they wish. While some connotations are high transient, briefly shaping actors' understandings of a community only to rapidly disappear again, others have a high degree of staying power, possibly defining how refugees are understood by a generation of individuals. Alongside being associated with a widely recognised legal definition and displaced individuals themselves, the word 'refugee' also, for example, conveys connotations that – despite the best efforts of states and UNHCR – can prove remarkably hard to shift.

The result can be immense frustration for these actors, aware as they are that there is much to be gained from promoting particular understandings of the caseloads under debate. As ideas and interests are clearly informed by how objects and words are perceived, engendering a shift in the meanings and concepts associated with refugees can be a productive path through which to change the behaviour of other parties interacting with them (Foucault, 1990).

While studies highlighting the importance of conceptualising words as multi-tiered constructs do exist within refugee studies, this framework provides some useful avenues for building on them. Drawing on work from feminist philosophy, Sveinsdóttir (2013), for example, distinguishes between the grounding property and the conferred or social property of an entity in any given context. In her schema, the latter 'high-level conferred property' is socially constituted, and depends on assumptions about identity. She argues that this determines the constraints and opportunities that individual's experience within a particular context and, as such, their behaviour in social domains. In the case of a refugee, she proposes that the legal status of these individuals would constitute the grounding property, and the conferred property would be the fact that an individual is *assumed* to be a refugee by those they interact with. She reasons that any progressive, social constructivist debunking should focus on the operative or influential property, which consists of whichever identity is conferred on an individual. '[W]hat matters socially,' Sveinsdóttir argues, 'is what you seem to be, not what you are' (*ibid.*: 729).

Understanding the label this way, however, sidesteps the importance of the 'game of hide-and-seek' that Barthes discusses. The first-order sign is always there to be drawn upon opportunistically to favour a particular politics or policies, or to be associated or disassociated with any new signifieds that may have greater utility in a given situation. In other words, Sveinsdóttir ignores that what matters is both 'what you are' *and* 'what you seem to be', albeit in different measures at different times. The legal bedrock of the label, for example, provides a convenient resource for humanitarian actors to 'hide' behind when establishing an ethical, political and financial bottom line to their activities (Inhetveen,

2006). Alternatively, if certain actors can attach new concepts to a particular population or group of refugees, this can prove useful for advancing new ideas and behaviours in relation to them.

Exploring the relationship between the orders

This takes us on to the second role that semiotics can play in developing our analyses of the refugee label, namely through drawing attention to the relationship between these different orders of meaning and how this can affect responses to refugees. The most obvious initial observation on this point, as alluded to earlier, is that the proliferation of meanings may retard collaborative action between groups and individuals. If actors' fail to agree on the significance of the refugees in question, this may make arriving at a mutually agreeable decision, or any agreement at all, largely impossible (Shacknove, 1985). While the Sudanese government saw Eritrean refugees displaced from the 1960s onwards as a means through which to extract money from the international community, for example, the Eritrean government in power from the early 1990s intermittently saw this community as a catalyst for economic growth and as a powerful destabilising force. The physical, symbolic and political significance of this group was thus hotly contested. As a result, and alongside a host of wider historical and contextual factors, no durable solution could be conceived of for this population that both suited the individuals on the ground and complemented the significance of this caseload as seen by the Eritrean and Sudanese regimes.

On the other hand, the emergence of an order of meaning largely detached from the label's original form and meaning may enable the achievement of a particular kind of compromise. In this process, an exclusive focus on a set of second-order signifieds results not in an interpretive 'slide', but in the appearance of a 'rupture' or disconnect between the orders of meaning. The original sign becomes disinvested of its form and meaning, such that it becomes largely disconnected from this initial reality (Baudrillard, 1981). Drawing on work by Frege, Bourdieu explains this as follows:

> 'words can have meaning without referring to anything. In other words, formal rigour can mask *semantic freewheeling*. All religious theologies and all political theodicies have taken advantage of the fact that the generative capacities of language can surpass the limits of intuition or empirical verification and produce statements that are *formally* impeccable but semantically empty' (Bourdieu, 1991: 41)

Underlying this is a process 'of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double…that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits its vicissitudes' (Baudrillard, 1981: 2). Rather than make these signs somehow 'unreal', Baudrillard stressed that this merely exposed their quality as what he termed simulacrum: 'that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference' (1981: 6). Detailing his schema, which appears to have relevance for words as much as images, he laid out five steps. First, an image is made to reflect reality. Second, it 'masks and denatures'

this reality. Third, it masks that this reality no longer exists. Fourth, the image's relationship to reality is severed. Fifth, the image 'is its own pure simulacrum' (ibid.).

Words, objects and discourses are then noted as having acquired a value in the linguistic marketplace that is increasingly independent of the material forms, or individuals, that they may have originally described. At this point, they can be said to have become units of exchange as discrete entities in their own right, which serve as an 'important political currency' for financial, symbolic and political gains (Zetter, 1991: 58; Irvine, 1989: 262-3; Bourdieu, 1991). This particularly interested scholars such as Eco and Baudrillard, who wished to observe what happened when actors exploited this disconnect by initiating and prolonging discussions that were designed *not* to refer back to the first-order signified and signifier at all. In other words, following the work of Bourdieu (1991), they wished to explore what happens when people trade in language alone.

'Symbolic Governance'

This form of exchange has been widely observed, with academics across various disciplines arguing that there exists a particular cultural economy in which words are decoupled, through intent or otherwise, from objects and actions (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In these instances, compromise is easier to achieve because the need for coordinated action is not there. Organisations and states are instead rewarded for declaring future activities even if they, and often their audiences, are aware that they are unlikely to ever deliver on these pledges. The fact that words can be used despite being 'semantically empty', in that the original signified and signifier are considered largely irrelevant for the word's new value and role, serves to facilitate and encourage this behaviour. Words are used, in other words, to 'talk the walk' (Taylor, 2014) or simply alone 'to do' as Austin (1975) might say, with little regard for their initial signified or signifier. This includes displaced individuals themselves.

Consensus over the future of refugees may thus be facilitated by discussions exhibiting only a pretence of referring to individuals on the ground. The label may be used without relating to actual refugees, avoiding the need for institutions and individuals to address challenging practical questions such as where should refugees go and who should take financial or legal responsibility for them. These questions may prove particularly irksome for an institution like UNHCR, which seeks to accommodate the expectations of donors, Countries of Asylum, Countries of Origin, refugees and the human rights lobby, none of which may be voicing particularly compatible expectations.

For O'Shaughnessy (2007), this tendency to avoid practical action in favour of symbolic politics has become institutionalised within contemporary forms of government. He argues that 'symbolic enactments' have become the centre of 'political culture,' giving rise to a 'belief that political objectives can be achieved by communication alone' (*ibid.*: 120). This is achieved through the 'broader trend in policymaking in which promotion is not just an essential component of the successful implementation

of policy but has become synonymous with policy implementation itself, making public relations and communication the prevailing mode of governance today' (Gies, 2011: 414). The result has been the rise of what O'Shaughnessy terms 'Symbolic Government'.

The value or importance for various groups of discussing 'refugees' even if only at the level of signification, detached from the legal definition and bodies on the ground, must not therefore be underestimated. Nor indeed should the capacity of words and labels to make this possible. Stakeholders can agree on policies towards refugees despite holding largely incompatible understandings of these populations because of the knowledge that the 'refugees' they are discussing exist in a realm increasingly detached from the displaced persons 'out there'. Though it may be too early to pass such judgement now, the World Humanitarian Summit and UN General Assembly meetings on refugees, both held in 2016 amidst enormous pomp and self-congratulation, may constitute the apotheosis of this phenomenon in the refugee regime. Recognition of this phenomenon therefore encourages a specific avenue of questioning: in what ways do the second-order signifieds of the refugee label relate to the individuals on the ground or their legal status, *if at all*, and how does this affect how decisions are made by and towards refugees.

Applying the theory to durable solutions

One area where this framework has particular analytical potential is in expanding our thinking about the historical and ongoing application of durable solutions. Existing literature on durable solutions generally relates a chronology of how they have been promoted at certain points of history, to which caseloads, and why (Loescher, 2001; Chimni, 1999; Crisp, 2004; Milner, 2009; Loescher and Milner, 2004).[3] The 'why' is most commonly explained through exploring how the interests of states and UNHCR shift in response to the geographical, political and financial pressures of broader international and institutional systems. How these shifts have been facilitated and accompanied by changes in the significance and meanings attached to refugees, however, often lacks any targeted analysis. Adopting the approach outlined above can nonetheless provide another analytical axis to this work, enriching these existing accounts in four main ways. Three of these will be discussed below. The strength of this approach in highlighting the effects of the 'rupture' detailed above are discussed elsewhere (Cole, 2016).

When new solutions require new concepts

As the political or economic priorities of UNHCR and states change, it is apparent that their outlook towards refugees is often in some way affected. A new discourse is then required to legitimise the

[3] The narrative presented below is clearly Eurocentric, with the shifts in perception based on a European reading of the refugee landscape and European views of desirable outcomes. Though authors such as Chimni challenge this bias within existing accounts, subaltern and/or racial histories of durable solutions remain rarely explored.

responses and durable solutions that they are willing to provide. Throughout the refugee crisis in West Berlin in 1953 and the emergency operation for Hungarian refugees in 1956, and driven by a sense that the organisation needed to adapt to survive, UNHCR, for example, recast refugees as humanitarian victims of state failure as well as political products of these same processes. This allowed the organisation, which harboured concerns for its continuing relevance in an international environment uncommitted to its future, to legitimately transform itself from a non-operational, high level protection-oriented agency to a provider of material, humanitarian assistance (Loescher, 2001).

Similarly, the emphasis on repatriation in the 1980s relied on the establishment of a particular understanding of refugees as having a static and axiomatic relationship to a singular place called 'home'. As resettlement no longer served the same political and economic purposes for Western Europe and North America, it came to be delegitimised by the suggestion that 'separation and alienation…should be recognised as contrary to both individual human interest and the well-being of societies, particularly in today's conditions' (Coles, 1988: 216-7). Refugees were then painted and understood as individuals distressed by their uprooting from a sedentarist and geographically fixed location in their Country of Origin, even though this assumption breaks down on many levels (Malkki, 1992; Black, 2002). The result, as Warner (1994; Loescher, 2001) suggests, was that because refugeehood had been redefined in popular usage to signify only a temporary caesura in an individual's protective relationship with their previous government, the possibility that political or social contracts would have to be laboriously built from scratch was often overlooked. Such a deceptively simple view enabled repatriation, without any emphasis on 'meaningful' citizenship (Long, 2012), to emerge and appear justifiable. For each desired durable solution, interested parties can thus create an 'ideal' refugee[4] to validate its application.

This perspective alone, however, serves to over-emphasise the agency and authority of states and UNHCR in accounts of how decisions over durable solutions are made. Words such as 'refugee' are not passive *tabula rasa* on to which new ideas and meanings can be decisively projected. Concepts and connotations at the second-order of meaning have their own power and resilience, defying the ability of actors to decide how they will be received and ultimately responded to. The label emerges through the actions of people, and its assignment is buttressed through an infrastructure of documents, behaviours and institutions. This means that how refugees are understood is not solely at the discretion of any one player, be it the refugees themselves or the organisations responding to them.

When new concepts necessitate new solutions

If a given caseload is associated with a particular set of connotations, certain responses and solutions may appear as the *only* suitable avenues for states and UNHCR to pursue. The Ethiopian Government

[4] This references Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's (2014) book entitled 'The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival'. I argue that the 'ideal' refugee is historically and contextually determined, thus suggesting that the refugees of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's work represent one of many, changing forms of 'ideal'.

in the 1970s, for example, was unlikely to have intended that Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti would become a blot on their public image (Crisp, 1984). Once they had, however, it conditioned the government's attempts to lobby authorities in Djibouti to push these individuals back. Similarly, and more systemically, discourses on global and regional security, inflated by incendiary media coverage, have compelled the international community to take the security implications of refugee movements more seriously. Regardless of the nature or scale of any threat these individuals may pose, governments have to be seen by their electorates to be designing policies to counter it. Loescher (2001) argues that one consequence of this has been that previously unacceptable policies, based on greater interventionism and restrictionism, have begun to appear somewhat justifiable as complementary 'durable solutions'. With refugees themselves coming to be understood as security risks and disturbers of the peace that states and UNHCR must attempt to contain at the source, durable solutions have thus shifted upstream in the last few decades. Prevention has come to be seen as an integral, almost morally necessary, component of responses.

Shifting these connotations, which become reinforced by discourses and practices in multiple different arenas, can prove extremely challenging. In response to states' and populations' increasingly entrenched perceptions of refugees as 'security threats' and 'economic burdens', UNHCR, advocates and academics have, for example, represented refugees as 'active agents of development, contributing to the economy and society of the host state' (UNHCR, 2006: 136: cited in Milner, 2009: 36). With roots in Fridtjof Nansen's suggestion that facilitating employment opportunities for refugees in the interwar period could contribute to solving Europe's economic woes (Loescher, 2001), much of the recent emphasis on refugees as economic agents and 'valuable resources' (Dick, 2003; Dryden-Peterson, 2006; Jacobsen, 2002) has pedalled a similar narrative: refugees have the impetus to produce economic change if the regulatory environment is conducive to them doing so (Betts et al, 2015; Betts and Collier, 2015). Their aim: to secure individual's safe passage, and encourage more liberal responses to asylum.

These attempts have nonetheless struggled to make significant headway against contemporary conventions, in which refugees are fairly consistently viewed as burdens. Ironically, it is here that the perpetuation of the image of the dependent, distressed and vulnerable refugee, particularly by those espousing the humanitarian imperative, becomes a counter-productive activity (Ticktin, 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010). Though it may inspire individuals' sympathies, it reifies an understanding of these individuals being largely in need of support, which may do little to advance a positive attitude among host communities towards their long-term integration.

When existing significance is not enough

Additional connotations thus clearly impact upon how solutions to refugees' circumstances are negotiated, in idiosyncratic but notable ways. This includes in accounting for an absence of durable solutions. Just as second-order signifieds concerning security, economics, humanitarianism and societal

value have motivated UNHCR, states and refugees to secure durable solutions for particular caseloads, the absence of any additional significance can leave refugees in protracted situations. For some, this 'invisibility' may be a blessing, enabling the acquisition of *de facto* durable solutions away from the potentially adverse interventions of states or UNHCR (Bakewell, 2000; 2002). For others, however, their physical displacement and legal status alone has never been enough to command the attention or space necessary to secure support (for example, see Gale, 2008). Connell (2015), for example, documents the protracted impoverishment of 14,000 Eritrean refugees in Djibouti, occupying a camp 'in a remote desert valley 30 kilometers from the nearest town.' Some have been awaiting assistance to secure a durable solution for twenty five years. With resources stretched and opportunities few, it is precisely their lack of additional significance that has failed to mobilise states and UNHCR to act on their responsibilities to provide these individuals with solutions.

Charting the significance of a particular caseload is thus not purely an academic task, but one critical to appeasing the multiple constituencies engaged in discussions about refugees' futures. Failing to recognise and accommodate the importance of these additional meanings, or lack thereof, may indeed undermine attempts to secure durable solutions. This positions the recognition of the historical, social and political connotations that adhere to refugees communities as an important pillar of institutional reflection and memory. In a review by Ek (2009: 4) on 'Lessons learned' from UNHCR's operations in Eastern Sudan, she cites Crisp in declaring that 'knowledge of past experiences, key in a protracted situation, has rarely been tapped into and the implications of disregarding the history of the operation has invariably led to repeated reinventions and ultimately waste of opportunities and resources.' Beyond documenting what has and has not worked with previous interventions, and why and when relationships between actors have proven conducive for changes to refugees' situations, the analytical angle showcased above suggests that processes of institutional introspection and learning should extend to documenting the connotations associated with a group of refugees too.

The promotion of a certain durable solution, either during a historical period or at a specific moment in time, is therefore often accompanied by, or responds to, an emphasis on particular understandings of the refugee caseload or displacement experience.[5] Importantly, this argument is not intended to suggest that markers of refugees' identities – such as race, gender and class – are not vital factors to consider when interacting with these individuals and their wider communities. Indeed, doing so is critical for ensuring that interactions and responses are sensitively and appropriately designed and conducted. The value of taking this approach, however, is to identify which connotations can account for such a

[5] This is not to discount instances when these actors do take observable characteristics of refugee caseloads in to account when determining the 'best' durable solution for their situation. These include the duration of their exile, the initial reasons for their displacement, the demographic composition of the group, and the preferences of individuals within it as to which durable solutions they would prefer.

differentiated set of global and localised responses to refugees, which has rendered the egalitarian promise of the refugee label increasingly obsolete, for better and for worse.

Discussion

Connotative systems evidently shape the behaviour of actors within the refugee regime, as the contestation that surrounds the meanings of certain 'signs' informs the broader politics of policy choices and implementation. A semiotic framework draws analytical attention to this, informing analyses that chart longitudinal changes in the meanings attached to – or conveyed by – refugees and their label, and how these inform and condition the behaviour of actors and the outcomes of their negotiations. As such, semiotics provides one heuristic tool for helping to understand this underexplored arena of politics within the refugee regime, through several avenues of analytical purchase. The next section briefly explores these, before the article concludes by highlighting how these observations require a rethinking of the role and value of the refugee label more specifically.

The role of a semiotic approach

Though the form of the word 'refugee' remains the same over time and across diverse geographical cases, this approach makes clear that what happens to its meaning warrants continual reflection. Semiotics focuses on exploring the evolving conceptual and geographical relationships between these different connotations, both perceived and in practice, and to what the implications of these might be. In particular, it requires us to establish which meanings, if any, exercise special authority in a certain setting. This is not to suggest that connotations necessarily exist in a hierarchy of importance, but that meanings emerge incrementally and sequentially in ways that affect their impact and role. It is the initial association of refugees with a legally binding framework, for example, that enables particular discussions to occur between individuals, states and UNHCR. It is because refugees come to mean so much more than a legal status alone can account for, however, that these discussions can become so valuable and important.

As Barthes (1972) made clear, the rapid alternation between these tiers of meaning has a clear value for actors; they can promote certain interpretations of refugees that are less established but of potential use to them, while maintaining a shared point of reference to 'hide' behind. Though this can prove detrimental for refugees, if these connotations are derogatory and encourage restrictive approaches, polyvalence is, importantly, not an intrinsically dangerous phenomenon (Fujimura, 1992). If objects are not contested, and people do not attempt to expand how they are viewed, the status quo would trundle on, often for worse as much as for better. In the field of refugee protection and international politics, Bradley (2009: 381) indeed notes that 'vagueness can be a virtue.' Drawing upon the concept of 'dignity', she suggests that its ambiguity may prove useful. Through enabling multiple interpretations, it remains open to becoming associated with more progressive, expansive agendas. She thus contends

that ‘the real value of the concept of return in safety and dignity is that it requires all those concerned with refugee protection to continually reflect on and refine their approach to facilitating voluntary repatriation’ on account of the fact that ‘safety’ and ‘dignity’ are not yet ossified concepts (*ibid.*: 381).

On the other hand, the multi-tiered framework discussed above illustrates the capacity of language to enable a rupture, between the words under discussion and the objects that initially bought them in to play. This encourages one to explore what can happen if and when orders of meaning become dissociated from each other, such as when discussions in international forums nominally around refugees are never intended to directly affect individuals on the ground.

Adopting this perspective reveals that gaps between law and practice must not be solely attributed to the vague and contradictory nature of policies and procedures that are ‘modified and differently interpreted and implemented by the authorities “on the ground”’ (Felder et al, 2014: 369). Instead, as refugees acquire or shed particular significance and connotations, these can become the main determinant of policies and the primary focus of discussions. Actors can realise, for example, that there is political capital to be gained from discussing refugees in only the most hypothetical of ways, while avoiding the negative ramifications of institutionalising any durable solutions, all of which may entail undesirable elements. The situation of persons on the ground is then relegated to a peripheral concern.

When that original referent is an individual, however, this theoretical disconnect does not play out in the same ways as when it is abstract concepts or inanimate objects such as ‘safety’ and ‘dignity’. Displaced communities respond to words, however ‘empty’ these signs are intended to be, in ways that may damage their prospects of achieving enduring solutions to their displacement. Many Rwandan refugees in Uganda, anticipating imminent changes to their protection statuses through a Cessation Clause increasingly and consciously emptied of practical consequence, have responded to blustering political rhetoric in ways that have done little to enhance their long-term security (Hovil, 2010; Cole, 2016). Charting the tiers of meaning contained within the refugee label, and reconstructing the relationship between them, is thus a further route through which to explore how the politics of meaning affects everyday outcomes in the refugee regime.

The refugee as ‘dehistoricised’ and ‘depoliticised’?

Approaching the word ‘refugee’ this way presents a theoretical and empirical challenge to the claim that the refugee label is either depoliticised or ahistorical. In ‘Speechless Emissaries’, Malkki (1996: 378) proposes both, contending that the refugee regime has served to ‘depoliticise the refugee category and to construct in that depoliticised space an ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject.’ Through ‘abstracting their predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts,’ Malkki contends that ‘humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees’ (*ibid.*). Other authors, including Zetter (1991),

support this, arguing that refugees' stories are readily ceded to the bureaucratic and homogenising dictates of the refugee label.

The framework outlined above, and the brief discussion of its applicability to studies on durable solutions suggests, however, that protracted refugee negotiations can emerge to some extent precisely because the refugee label is *incapable* of doing this. It cannot standardise individual's situations or prevent their politicisation becoming intractable. Words, of which 'refugee' is no exception, are prone to accrue and lose meanings. While Malkki and Zetter's ideas thus likely hold true on an individual level and within caseloads of refugees, where personal stories and histories are subsumed in discussions around the group's future, it has proven almost impossible to distil the complexity of refugee situations down to a legal status alone, even if this is what the 'label' is in part intended to achieve. As a result, it may be because we do not have an 'ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject' that there continues to be such significant discrepancies in how different caseloads are responded to. Legal status may place individuals on the list as requiring a durable solution, but additional significance of any form may well be what is needed to bump them up the queue. Without therefore advocating for an approach that promotes historical reductionism or that denies individual's vast heterogeneity, 'universalising' some aspects of refugees' experiences may have a value. It may prove useful for ensuring that communities who possess little by way of additional political, symbolic or financial significance are not overlooked altogether.

The corollary of this argument is to caution against work that promotes 'new' understandings of refugees without adequately emphasising the importance of the word's legal-normative basis. If the word refugee becomes associated only with mass displacement in war, for example, those who do not fit this reading risk being treated with scepticism at best, and going unrecognised at worst. Eritreans, who constitute the largest group of refugees by nationality to be leaving a country seemingly at peace, exemplify this, as host communities regularly question the authenticity of their plight. Alternatively, other forms of representation may contribute to more expansive expectations of what refugees *could* or *should* be. This raises a possible danger with recent attempts to counter the widespread association of refugees with 'helplessness' and 'dependence' (Harrell-Bond, 1986) by presenting refugees as economic innovators (Betts et al, 2014) or political protagonists. These latter portrayals, such as the positioning of Syrian refugees as 'economic catalysts' in Jordan (Betts and Collier, 2015), may justify the further retrenchment in refugee assistance, or result in the discounting of those individuals who do not signify agents of political and economic change. Gies (2014: 16-17) has voiced similar concerns in the case of the promotion of human rights within the United Kingdom:

> 'The charge against tabloids that they spread distortions and myths about human rights can equally be levelled against positive human rights messages emanating from official sources. There may be significant differences between 'negative' publicity and a 'positive' promotion of rights, but as far as form and content are concerned, the very idea of

> promotion implies privileging aspects of rights which are likely to be more palatable to a particular audience, such as the idea that the innocent and the vulnerable in society benefit greatly from rights protection, over other more problematic ideas, such as the equality principle protecting everyone's rights indiscriminately, regardless of moral status.'

Much like Gies, I therefore argue that, however benevolently intended, caution should be exercised around too enthusiastically promoting particular characteristics or 'concepts' of the refugee experience without also emphasising the 'equality principle'. Individuals are entitled to certain institutional responses from the moment they fulfil the original signifier and signified of refugee status, regardless of their socio-economic situation or other differentiating characteristics.

The approach detailed above is therefore intended to highlight the need to move beyond focusing on certain dynamics through the lens of 'labelling' alone. The word 'refugee' has many more functions than simply 'to label' an object: alongside describing individuals and objects and bestowing meaning, it acts as a repository, accumulating histories, ideas and connotations. It allows individuals, states and UNHCR a language and space within which to try to influence the behaviour of others, with the effective promotion of additional signifieds one route through which to shape others' attitudes towards refugees and subsequently how 'solutions' to their situation are envisaged.

The label's position at the interstices of different structures and systems of meaning, and its ability to become nigh on detached from its formative connotations, in fact means that approaching it *only* as a label risks perpetuating an ontological blind spot with regards to its more expansive role and function. It ignores how the marker refugee may function almost exclusively as shorthand for a range of second-order signifieds that exhibit only a very limited relationship to the legal-normative or embodied components of refugeehood. Semiotics provides an analytical framework to explore this. It builds on the observation that this word conveys different meanings and with manifold effects, to present an approach that asks how it comes to have meaning and that focuses on the relationships between various meanings, and between meanings and their effects (Sturrock, 1986: 22). This article therefore argues that it may prove more instructive to conceptualise the word 'refugee' as exactly that: as a word that *at times* functions as a label – designating, describing and delineating – but that is by no means exclusively limited to that role.

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